

An aerial photograph of a tropical coastline. The image shows a wide expanse of turquoise water with white sand beaches visible along the shore. The sky is a deep blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is serene and picturesque, typical of a tropical island environment.

Matthew McCaslin Harnessing Nature

Matthew McCaslin: Harnessing Nature

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Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

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This brochure accompanies Matthew McCaslin's site-specific installation
"Harnessing Nature," co-organized by Thelma Golden, associate curator,
and Matthew Yokobosky, assistant curator, film and video, Whitney Museum
of American Art.

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Cover photograph by Matthew McCaslin

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Harnessing Nature

by Matthew Yokobosky

You walk into an empty room. The walls and floor are smooth and painted. There are a few discreetly placed outlets around the perimeter of the room; these outlets contain electricity, heat, air conditioning, cable television signals, telephone and internet access. These are the only visible signs of the potential energy and power which lies dormant in those walls.

Behind these walls, though, are dozens of aluminum building studs, yards of electrical cables, insulation, pipes, heat and air conditioning ducts, telephone lines, audio

speaker wires, intercom wires, video cables, and copper computer lines. These are the support systems of a modern environment; an equipped room that can accommodate all of our needs for electrical power, temperature control, and various means of telecommunications. These unseen supports are the materials that inspire the sculptures and installations of Matthew McCaslin.

Using industrial materials of construction, with their polished finishes and carefully engineered constructions, McCaslin's sculptures and installations transpose the interior structures of building and engineering to visible space. The exhibition room, not unlike a room in a modern home—four walls, ceiling, floor, electrical outlets, etc.—becomes a shell in which those interior structures and trapped energies extend through the walls. We are looking at both the room, constructed from these structures and conduits, and the unprotected, skeletal forms themselves as elements of an art installation: an interior/exterior view.



In McCaslin's work *The Sky Is Falling* (1991), a dropped ceiling is split. The perimeter of the ceiling is edged with suspended tiles; the center tiles are hung several feet lower than the perimeter, as if a geometric, hovering cloud. Suddenly you are able to see the structure that suspends a dropped ceiling. Taking its title from the story of Chicken Little, *The Sky Is Falling* is a frozen moment—the act of falling is stopped in mid-air.

In an earlier work, *American Beauty* (1989), the theme of displacement was extended to the idea of a blowing flag. An American flag was placed upright on a floor stand; several feet away, a fan, also on a floor stand of the same height, blew toward the viewer, not the flag. Separating the flag and the wind (a fan), the two-piece sculpture became a mental puzzle. You had to imagine the unfurled flag suspended in air by the wind.

Video allows the visual representation of other facets of nature that cannot be expressed through fanlike breezes or

electric light. McCaslin's recent work *Bloomer* uses time-lapse photography to capture the silent surprise of blooming flowers. The daylong process of a flower going from bud to open bloom is accelerated, so that we see the flowers blooming in seconds. This experience is then multiplied as several videotapes are shown on multiple monitors. The floor of this video garden is, like vines of morning glories, strewn with electrical and coaxial video cables. The installation is not simply the video imagery itself, but a combination of this imagery as it coexists with the hardware of the cables, monitors, and videotape players themselves. We are looking at an installation in which all of the moving parts are visible.

Nevertheless the central motif of *Bloomer* is the emergence of the flowers, as they are preserved on video, and the repeated excitement of that moment. We associate the experience of seeing a flower bloom with the wonderment and unpredictability of nature. Although the blooming

of a flower is a phenomenon that can be scientifically explained, we are typically interested in the perceived "event" of the bloom, not the mechanics of its action. *Bloomer*, therefore, offers the viewer a continuous state of surprise, as the flowers repeat their magic acts over and over, creating an ever-blooming garden of delight.

This repetition is possible through the use of videotape, a medium with which McCaslin harnesses the activities of nature. Previously he has used video imagery of forest fires burning out of control, repeating the act of destruction again and again. In his newest work at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, ocean waves crest and break in an unending crescendo. Similar to the destabilization of a television's vertical hold, which produces the effect of "vertical roll," this constant, visual repetition makes us aware of the television's objectness—that the image we see on the monitor is not a magical experience but a mechanical or electronic one. The television

The Sky Is Falling (detail),
1991. Exhibition space, steel
cables, metal structure, false
ceiling, and electric cables.
Installation at Galerie
Jennifer Flay, Paris

monitor becomes an object or container of the event. But unlike a narrative work, in which a linear story is told through multiple images, here one or several similar movements repeat, capturing a single mood or emotion.

In this installation, the ocean is captured at its most dramatic. We cannot see the sky or the shore, only the water. The event of one wave crashing is multiplied on several monitors, as the act of blooming is multiplied on twelve video monitors in *Bloomer*. It is not just one wave crashing and breaking. We enter into a space in which the repetition of image and sound becomes like the repeated rhythm of a musical work—and therefore environmental. The loud crash of water breaking once is an event, but its repetition becomes hypnotic.

We cannot hear electricity move through wires; we cannot hear a video signal move through cable; we cannot hear an audio signal move through copper wires. These are silent experiences that can only be described at the

speed of sound, the speed of light. What is needed are instruments which can translate these signals into sound and vision: speakers and televisions. Frequently, almost punningly, McCaslin has used electric clocks, which measure time in seconds; but the energy needed to run the clock is moving faster than the clock itself.

McCaslin's use of video is an extension of time and clocks. The videotape medium is broken into thirty images per second. These images move by quickly to simulate motion. Videotape is edited with a time code; each image is given a specific time within the sequence of images. We can take one image from one tape and splice to another and through this process create narrative stories. In *Bloomer*, McCaslin used the time code as part of the image, so that the viewer could see the "time-lapse," in other words a highly accelerated version of a slow process. This acknowledgment of video and its timing properties reflects the behavior of nature: set by the sun, set by the

Bloomer (detail), 1995.
Video installation with audio.
Collection of Clyde and
Karen Beswick.
Installation at Michael Klein
Gallery, New York



seasons, in this case spring. The cycles of nature are all based on time, which ultimately is based on the sun; time, therefore, is a natural phenomenon.

To be in a space where cables transport signals and the translators of signals forces us to look at the space as a system—as one would think of the human body as a system, of central air conditioning as a system, of a stereo system. All parts work together to create a whole “experience.”

In McCaslin’s work, however, we are seeing more than the inner workings of a system. We are not merely looking at an unplastered room with exposed pipes and wires or the insides of a computer. What is of interest is McCaslin’s ability to take those structures usually hidden from view—and use their industrial textures and high-tech forms to create art works that pay homage to light, water, and nature. By using recorded images, recorded sounds, light bulbs, and fans, he simulates the essential appearances of the moving image, continuous sound, light and wind, and creates an



atmosphere reminiscent of nature, but in a combination that nature could not achieve. An ocean cannot be layered; flowers do not generally grow to the width of a 15-inch monitor; wind does not blow only in one direction. With the materials of industry and technology, McCaslin has harnessed the unpredictable qualities of nature, creating experiences of nature that are familiar, yet unsettling in their dissimilarity to the real world.

Indigenous Species, 1991.
Exhibition space, electric
cables, and light bulbs.
Installation at Castello
di Rivara, Turin, Italy.
Photograph by Studio Blu



American Beauty, 1989.
American flag, fan, two floor
stands. Installation at the
Daniel Newburg Gallery,
New York

Matthew McCaslin

Born in Bayshore, New York
Lives in Brooklyn, New York
Parsons School of Design, New York
(BFA, 1980)

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

1995
Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, D.C.
Feigen Gallery, Chicago
Michael Klein Gallery, New York, "Bloomer"
Sima Gallery, Nuremberg, Germany,
"Life Line: Two Installations"

1994
Kunstverein, Münster, Germany
Franz Paludetto Gallery, Turin, Italy
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Germany

1993
Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels, Belgium,
"Lynne Cohen, Matthew McCaslin"
Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany

Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York, "Event"
Franz Paludetto Gallery, Turin, Italy
Postmasters Gallery, New York, "Damage Total"

1992
The Museum of Modern Art, New York,
"Projects 33: Matthew McCaslin"
Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Santa Monica,
California

1991
Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris,
"La géométrie au service des plafonds"
Le Consortium, Dijon, France
Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York
Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London
Daniel Weinberg Gallery,
Santa Monica, California

1989
Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York,
"Landscapes of the Inbetween"

Selected Group Exhibitions

1995

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art,
Ridgefield, Connecticut,
“Drawn on the Museum”

Città di Padova, Italy,
“Oltre la normalità concentrica”

Creative Time, New York,
“Art in the Anchorage: Material Matters”

Sandra Gering Gallery, New York,
“Rainer Ganahl and Matthew McCaslin”
Galerie Christine König, Vienna, “Low Tech”

1994

Baumgartner Galleries, Washington, D.C.,
“Summer Group Show”

Le Consortium, Dijon, France,
“Country Sculpture”

Royal Academy of Engineering Sciences,
Stockholm, “IVA IT-Festival”

Bob van Orsouw Galerie, Zurich,
“Adieu, les frontières!”

Villa du Parc, Annemasse, France,
“L'objet dans l'art contemporain”

“Wandelhalle” project, Cologne,
“The Deutzer Bridge”

1993

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art,
Ridgefield, Connecticut,
“Simply Made in America”

Gallery Jürgen Becker, Hamburg,
“Steve di Benedetto and Matthew McCaslin”
Forum für Kunst, Bonn, “Fireproof/Feuerfest”
Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany,
“The Nightshade Family”

Massimo Minini, Brescia, Italy, “Pretty Visible”
Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, “Prospect 93”
Galerie Sophia Ungers, Cologne, “Im Bau”
Daniel Weinberg Gallery, New York,
“Twenty Years”

1992

Centre National D'Art Contemporain de
Grenoble, France, “More than Zero”
Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris, “Not Quiet”
Galerie de Poche, Paris, “Works-Concepts-
Processes-Situations-Information”

1991

Castello di Rivara, Turin, Italy
Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam,
“The Museum of Natural History”

Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York
Postmasters Gallery, New York,
“Idiosyncrasies in the Expanded Field”
Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, “Invitational”

1990

Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York,
“Work in Progress? Work?”
Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, “Detritus:
Transformation and Re-construction”

1987

Galerie Pierre Huber, Geneva,
“The Art of the Real”

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris
Park Avenue at 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017

Gallery Hours

Monday-Friday, 11:00 am-6:00 pm
Thursday, 11:00 am-7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday-Saturday, 7:30 am-9:30 pm
Sunday, 11:00 am-7:00 pm

Gallery Talks

Wednesday and Friday at 1:00

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Tours by appointment
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